

33. IBN AL-ATHĪR ON SICILIAN MUSLIMS UNDER CHRISTIAN RULE: *THE COMPLETE TREATMENT OF HISTORY* (mid-twelfth century)

Translated from Arabic by Joshua Birk

In the latter half of the eleventh century, Norman warriors conquered Sicily and much of southern Italy. These Latin Christians found themselves ruling over large populations of both Muslims and Greek Christians. Ibn al-Athīr, a Muslim scholar from Mosul, who lived at the tail end of the twelfth century, painted a complex picture of the relationship between the Christian lords and their Muslim subjects in his Complete Treatment of History.

4 JULY 1144–23 JUNE 1145

It is said that the lord of the island of Sicily [Roger II] dispatched raiding ships to Tripoli and that this military operation plundered and murdered. At this time there lived in Sicily a learned Muslim, a pious man. The lord of Sicily honored and venerated him. He consulted his words and gave precedence to him over any among his priests or monks, and because of this a rumor began among the people that he [Roger II] was a Muslim.

One day while he [Roger II] was sitting in his watchtower, he looked down on the sea, and at the time a small ship drew near. And it brought news to him that his forces had penetrated the lands of the Muslims, plundered, killed, and been victorious. The aforementioned Muslim was at the king's side and was dozing. The king said to him, calling him by name, "Did you hear what they said?" The Muslim responded, "No." The king replied that the troops had destroyed such-and-such a place. "Where was your Muhammad? Was he away from his land and his people?" And the Muslim answered him, "If he was away from that conquest, it is because he witnessed the fall of Edessa, which was just captured by the Muslims."¹ Some of the Franks who were there mocked him, but the king said, "Do not laugh! What he says is the truth!" Days later, news of the conquest of Edessa arrived.

29 MARCH 1153–17 MARCH 1154

In this year, the fleet of Roger, king of the Franks in Sicily, came to the city of Bone.² The fleet was commanded by the king's eunuch, Philip of Mahdiya.

Translated from Ibn al-Athīr, *'Izz al-Din Abū al-Hasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, al-Jazār, Kāmil fi'l-Tārikh*, ed. Carolus Johannes Tornberg (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1966), vol. II, 100, 187.

1. In December 1144, the armies of the Muslim commander 'Imad ad-Din Zengi, Atabeg of Mosul and Aleppo, conquered the city of Edessa, the capital of the first of the crusader states.

2. A coastal city in northeastern Algeria, now Annaba.



Figure 8. Ceremonial mantle of Roger II (1133/34). The border inscription reads: "This was made in the royal factory for the good fortune, supreme honor, perfection and power, the betterment, capacity, prosperity, sublimity, glory, beauty, the increase of [his] security, fulfillment of his hopes, the goodness of [his] days and nights without end or interruption, for [his] power and guard, [his] defense and protection, good fortune, salvation, victory and excellence. In the capital of Sicily, in the 528th year [of the Hegira = 1133/4]." Translation by Jeremy Johns, 1986. The mantle was subsequently used for the coronation of Staufen rulers, Frederick II, possibly among them. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource)

With the assistance of Arabs, Philip besieged Bone and captured the city in the month of Rajab (22 September–21 October 1153), and took the people of Bone prisoner and seized what was within the city. However, he ignored a group of learned and pious men, so that they fled from the city to the countryside with their families and their possessions. And, after staying in Bone for ten days, Philip returned to Mahdiya accompanied by some of his captives. Then he returned to Sicily, where Roger arrested him because of his kindness toward the Muslims of Bone.

It was said that he [Philip] and all his eunuchs were secretly Muslims. People bore witness that he did not fast with the king, and that he was a Muslim. Roger assembled the bishops, the clergy, and the knights, and they sentenced Philip to be burned to death. And his annihilation by fire occurred in the month of Ramadan [20 November–19 December 1153]. This was the first injury to befall the Muslims of Sicily.